

Reflections on *The Immortalists* (A Tri-C Common Reading Program Assignment)

Due: _____

Original Discussion Board Post: ___ points (minimum length: 250 words)

Three Response Posts: 3 @ ___ points each = ___ points (minimum length per response: 50 words)

Assignment (for all options):

Step 1: Watch the following film trailer:
<http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi2648616729>

Step 2: View the full film (1 hours, 20 minutes):

The Immortalists. Dir. David Alvarado and Jason Sussberg. Gaiam, 2014.

The film is being shown on Tri-C's Western Campus on the following days:

- Sept. 30 (Wednesday) @ 9:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.
Location: WSS G-04A
- October 1st (Thursday) @ Noon and 2:00 p.m.
Location: WSS G-04A and G-04B

Alternatively, your instructor may choose to show you the film during class.

Or, you can access the film personally through various digital services, including Amazon Instant Video, iTunes, Xbox Video, Google play, nook, and hoopla.

Step 3: Select ONE of the writing prompt options below and respond to it in a thoughtful 250 – 300 word reflection.

Step 4: Post your reflection to our class Blackboard site, in the appropriate Discussion Board forum.

Step 5: Respond to any three (3) of your classmates' original posts in that same forum. (The minimum length for *each* response post is 50 words.)

➤ Please see the class guidelines and rubric for [Discussion Board posts](#) and [response posts](#).

ASSIGNMENT OPTIONS: SELECT JUST ONE

Students on all four Tri-C campuses will be viewing this film, each with a different interpretive lens. Some students will be discussing the film in their Science course. Others will be exploring the documentary in a Philosophy, History, English, Psychology, or Sociology course. Indeed, *The Immortalists* raises issues that intersect all of these disciplines.

Select ONE of the writing prompt options below.

Option 1: Psychology

Although they disagree about the specific *type* of research we should conduct, Aubrey de Grey and Bill Andrews both operate from a similar premise – that aging is, indeed, undesirable and should be “cured.”

But others, like magic-realist writer Isabel Allende, express a different view. Listen to Allende’s recent TED Radio Hour interview with Guy Roz, which you can access via the link below:

“Is Aging Really So Bad?” (9 minutes) – Isabel Allende

<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=408242106&>

Write a short paragraph (250 – 300 words) in which you answer the following two questions:

Toward the end of that interview, Allende talks about the *benefits* of aging – the manner in which it has transformed her for the better. Do you agree that aging has these benefits?

How might Aubrey de Grey and Bill Andrews respond to her claims?

In the mist of your discussion, make at least one specific reference to Allende’s interview.

Option 2: Sociology

In *The Postmortal*, Magary’s dystopian society has created “cycle marriages,” a series of monogamous relationships (and, possibly, corresponding families) which extend over the course of a person’s very long life.

Aubrey de Grey agrees that the prospect of extending life may, in his words, “lead to a re-evaluation of the value of permanent monogamy.” However, in *The Immortalists*, Dr. de Grey proposes a *different* model than the “cycle marriage” – one he is experimenting with himself. De Grey explains that he sees himself as “a poster boy for a future lifestyle” involving permanent *polygamous* relationships.

Write a short paragraph (250 – 300 words) in which you answer the following two questions:

In your opinion, are the “cycle marriage” in *The Postmortal* and the polygamy model proposed by Aubrey de Grey in *The Immortalists* both inevitable responses to the “cure”?

Which version seems most suitable and sustainable for a society in which people live to the ripe old age of, say, 200 years? (Or, would it still be possible to sustain a traditional marriage in which a person stays with the same one partner for the entire scope of his or her adult life?)

Option 3: Environmental Science

Toward the end of *The Immortalists*, we witness the final segment of a debate between Aubrey de Grey and Colin Blakemore, a British neurobiologist representing the “old guard” of scientific thought. In Blakemore’s words, “Success in achieving the goal of immortality would be a disaster of apocalyptic proportions.”

Read this 2015 article published in *The Guardian*:

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jan/15/rate-of-environmental-degradation-puts-life-on-earth-at-risk-say-scientists>

Write a short paragraph (250 – 300 words) in which you answer the following question:

In the face of limited natural resources, does one generation have the moral responsibility to hand off the baton to the next generation? In other words, does each generation have a moral obligation to die, so that we avoid “a disaster of apocalyptic proportions”?

In the midst of your discussion, make at least one specific reference to *The Guardian* article.

Option 4: Philosophy

The research journeys which Aubrey de Grey and Bill Andrews have embarked upon have many implications for society. In the film, Andrews predicts that “hundreds of years from now, we’re going to look back on and be shocked about the horrible world that we all used to live in, where people used to get old and die.” But is old age intrinsically undesirable, or does society make it that way?

Jan Baars, a modern philosopher and Professor of Interpretive Gerontology, makes the following observation about our modern culture: “We live in an era when ever-faster, ever-larger flows of information and images fly around the globe, leading to a cultural acceleration of everyday life.” According to Baars, this everyday life acceleration causes “premature aging, in which individuals live longer but are called old at earlier ages” (qtd. in Cole).

In a brief paragraph (250 – 300 words), reflect upon the following:

Does our modern culture, with its bombardment of information and ever-evolving technology, really cause us to age prematurely, at least in a *cultural* sense? In other words, does each generation become “outdated” more quickly than the previous one?

If so, what effect does this have on the individual’s and society’s perception of old age and the elderly?

Option 5: English

The filmmakers, David Alvarado and Jason Sussberg, might have created *The Immortalists* without the personal factor. Instead, they chose to engage us in a scientific discussion against the backdrop of a *story* – a portrait of two men’s lives. In other words, the film educates us about telomeres and regenerative medicine, even while inviting us to experience such events as Andrews’ ultra-marathon endeavors and de Grey’s seemingly effortless ability to steer a canoe while holding a beer.

In essence, the documentary is steeped in narrative as the directors give voice to these scientists’ romantic pursuits, battles against their own aging processes, and personal loss. As viewers, we share Andrews’ and de Grey’s sense of helplessness as they watch their loved ones grow old and die during the course of the documentary.

In a brief paragraph (250 – 300 words), reflect upon the power of storytelling within this film. In the midst of your discussion, address the following two questions:

How different would this documentary have been without the narrative element?

Does that narrative *enrich* or *diminish* the discussion? (For example, were any critical elements missing – elements that could have been included, had the narrative not consumed so much of the film?)

Option 6: Science

Critics with *The Los Angeles Times* have described *The Immortalists* as “a lively documentary focusing on a pair of very different biomedical scientists who are equally obsessed with eradicating the ravages of time.” Although Aubrey de Grey and Bill Andrews are both convinced that we will, some day, find a cure for aging, these two biomedical scientists strongly disagree about the path we should pursue in achieving that end.

On the one hand, Bill Andrews is overseeing research that focusses on the **telomere** – the very end of a chromosome which shortens every time a cell divides. He believes that if we can find a way to activate telomerase (the enzyme that *lengthens* telomeres), the human cell will be immortal. (Andrews’ team at Geron Corporation did, by the way, successfully clone the RNA component of human telomerase in 1997.)

On the other hand, Aubrey de Grey promotes research that applies **regenerative medicine** to the process of aging, his theory being that we need to find ways to regularly clear out the molecular and cellular damage as it accumulates over time. In other words, de Grey believes that if we can repair the human body as quickly as it breaks down, we will, in his words, “have the ability to live indefinitely.” He supports rejuvenation biotechnology such as somatic cell nuclear transfer (therapeutic cloning) to replace lost cells.

If you select this prompt, spend about 10 minutes perusing Aubrey de Grey’s website (SENS Research Foundation) and Bill Andrews’ website (Sierra Sciences) by using the links below:

- SENS Research Foundation: <http://www.sens.org/>
- Sierra Sciences: <http://sierrasci.com/>

After perusing the websites referenced above, write a short reflection (250 – 300 words) in which you answer the following questions:

In your opinion, which of the two research paths seems most promising? Why?

In the midst of your discussion, make at least one specific reference to both websites.

Option 7: Business / Economics

Does the prospect of immortality decrease the desire to innovate when there is no sense of finality? In other words, is a person able to be productive without a “due date”?

In a brief paragraph (250 – 300 words), reflect upon the above question.